

# Dorcas thimble boxes

In 2000 the members of the Needlework Tool Collectors Society of Australia [NTCSA] made their Dorcas thimble boxes available for recording. Lee Bateman and Sue Gowan undertook this to coincide with Lee's presentation on Dorcas thimbles. It is only with a good quantity of items for comparison, that any research becomes possible.

Copies of the photographs were placed in the library of the NTCSA and a second set given to the Dorset Thimble Society. Originally the boxes were photographed against a ruler, but this has not proved satisfactory in showing the actual measurements of the boxes.

It is now time to share these boxes with the wider thimble collecting community in the hope that further examples will turn up and to stimulate further research. More importantly, it is necessary to record this information for future collectors as these boxes are fragile and the information on the bases has been lost or worn to illegibility.

I am often asked whether one should keep the boxes in which thimbles are supplied. Without the boxes produced with the Dorcas thimbles, our knowledge would be poorer. Similarly, if no "Nifty" thimble boxes remained, there would be no link to Australia's "Nifty" sterling silver thimbles, as it is only on their boxes that the word 'Australia' appears. In modern collections, where space is of a premium, it is more difficult to retain modern thimble boxes, but if those needlewomen hadn't passed down their Dorcas thimbles in their original boxes...

Charles Horner, of Halifax England, patented his steel-cored sterling silver Dorcas thimbles in March 1885 and they were made from then until 1947. They have the beauty and comfort of silver with the core of steel, which gave it strength.

This was a major change in the way thimbles were made and Horner took advantage of this with clever marketing. He soon offered an unconditional guarantee of exchange on these new thimbles. It was the first time that thimbles had been sold with an unconditional guarantee.

This guarantee was placed on the underside of the cardboard thimble boxes that Dorcas thimbles were sold in.

For those who own a Dorcas thimble in its original cardboard box, you are indeed fortunate. Because they are not common, you may not be aware how wide the diversity of boxes is and how the exchange guarantee changed over the years.

We do not know which thimbles were supplied with which boxes. There were several different patterns on Dorcas thimbles, but again no specific box matched a specific design.

To date we know of 20 different types of Dorcas boxes with four composite Dorcas boxes. Sometimes, it is just a different colour for the guarantee, sometimes a different coloured inner velvet lining, on the bottom half only.

Most of the boxes have a white trim around the edges of the lid.

The interest then lies in the lettering on the front of the boxes and in the different labels on the base of these boxes.

There are two forms of guarantee and together with the first label which has no guarantee of exchange, they would roughly correspond to three phases of Dorcas thimbles production. Guarantee 2 always names the size as '10', no matter what size thimble the box contained.

The 9-carat gold Dorcas thimble boxes differed from those for the silver ones, in that the gold thimble boxes are hinged. There is no exchange guarantee on those boxes.

So if your box is hinged, it would originally have contained a gold Dorcas thimble.

Horner did not use the name Dorcas on his newly patented thimbles. Initially they were only marked with the word PAT. (for Patent) plus a number (the size). The early Dorcas thimbles produced had no guarantee of exchange.

The boxes with label 1 would be on the earliest boxes and they do have the name Dorcas on them. Once he gauged the popularity of his thimbles, the guarantee was added.

What seems unclear from the current thimble literature is when Horner began to use the name Dorcas, but it was during the 1890s. When he did, the thimbles were marked DORCAS, with C.H. and the size.

The boxes with Guarantee 1 would be used on the next era of boxes.

After approximately 1898 the British thimble trade began to use 'British Made'.

Up until 1905 the Dorcas thimble apices were domed, which would have necessitated having a bigger thimble box and may correspond to the box sizings.

Horner introduced the Improved Dorcas in 1905: it was a completely new process. It was after this that the thimble apex was flat. The fit is very snug for these later thimbles in the smaller boxes produced after 1905. The words "Improved Dorcas" appear on these exchange guarantees:  
see Guarantee 2

Horner also produced The Little Dorcas with its own box and label - there were no guarantees of exchange on the bottom of these boxes, which were housed in these little cardboard thimble boxes. The rarest Dorcas box that has recently come to my attention is for The London Dorcas.

It is difficult enough to find the London Dorcas thimble, never mind finding the matching thimble box!

Since being sent photos of the Dorcas composite boxes, this section is now growing with an undreamt of selection when I began this topic. These would have been used by haberdashers, jewellers or salesmen to display the range of sizes or patterns of Dorcas thimbles.

So popular were the Dorcas thimbles that Horner's competitors started producing their own steel-cored silver thimbles after Horner's patents expired - in the 1920s - Dreema by Henry Griffith and Son, Dura by Walker & Hall and Doris by Charles Iles and the metal thimble The Dorothy by Charles Iles. I have included the Dura (finally a rare Dura Box has turned up!!), Dreema, The Dorothy and Doris boxes for comparison. None have Horner's unconditional guarantee.

I encourage you to seek out the four references listed at the end of these pages, to find out more about Dorcas thimbles and the related steel-cored sterling silver thimbles.

As I don't own any of these boxes, I need help with the sizing in millimetres, please.

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### Other Charles Horner thimble topics

Charles Horner Ltd sterling silver thimbles with other sponsor's marks  
Charles Horner's early Dorcas "PAT." thimbles  
Horner and hearts

# Dorcas boxes



**Label 1**

## The "Dorcas" Thimble STERLING SILVER

Made in three parts, the inner and the outer being Silver, and the intermediate Steel, giving a resisting power not obtained in Silver only.



### **The Dorcas**

grey blue box  
with white trim  
cursive gold writing diagonally  
maroon paper label  
blue velvet lining



### **The Dorcas**

grey blue box  
with white trim  
cursive gold lettering diagonally  
blue paper label  
blue velvet lining



### **The Dorcas**

grey blue box  
with white trim  
cursive green lettering diagonally  
maroon paper label  
blue velvet lining



### **The Dorcas**

lilac box  
with white trim  
cursive gold lettering diagonally  
blue paper label  
blue velvet lining



### **The Dorcas**

lilac box  
with white trim  
cursive gold lettering diagonally  
green paper label  
dark blue velvet lining

## GUARANTEE 1



**Guarantee 1**

### **GUARANTEE**

**Exchanged free if rendered useless from any cause whatsoever.  
Made of Sterling Silver with interlining of hardened steel.  
None genuine without the name 'DORCAS' C.H.  
BRITISH MADE**



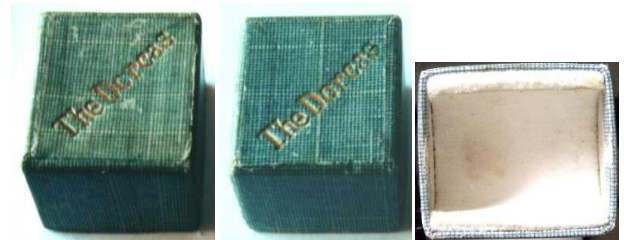
### **THE DORCAS**

dark blue box  
bold gold lettering  
green paper guarantee  
white velvet lining



### **The Dorcas**

cross-hatched blue box  
gold lettering diagonally  
green paper guarantee  
blue velvet lining  
size 27x25mm



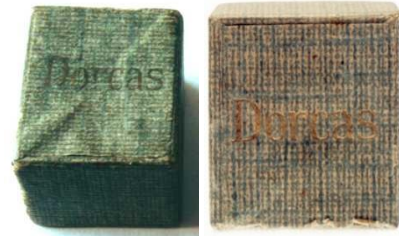
### **The Dorcas**

cross-hatched blue box  
gold lettering diagonally  
black paper guarantee  
white velvet lining  
size 27x25mm



**THE DORCAS**

cross-hatched blue box  
gold lettering  
black paper guarantee  
blue velvet lining



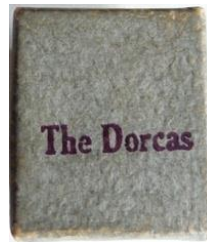
**Dorcas**

cross-hatched blue-green box  
gold lettering  
green paper guarantee  
creamy-white velvet lining



**The Dorcas**

bubbly texture, grey box  
maroon lettering  
white paper guarantee with blue lettering  
green velvet lining  
size 30x27mm



**The Dorcas**

bubbly texture, grey box  
maroon lettering  
green paper guarantee  
green velvet lining  
size 31x26X20mm

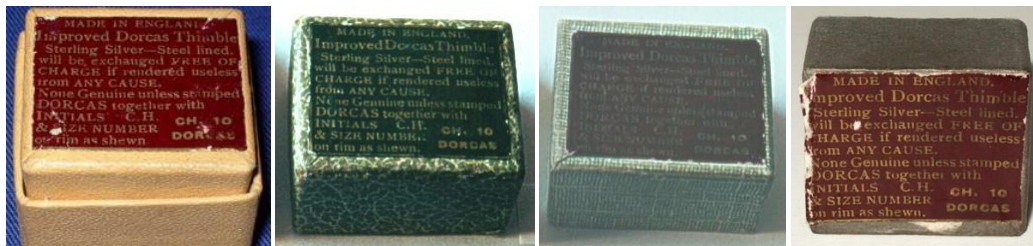


**The Dorcas**

cross-hatched blue box  
raised gold lettering diagonally  
green paper guarantee  
ivory velvet lining  
size 30x27mm



## GUARANTEE 2



**Guarantee 2**

**MADE IN ENGLAND**  
**Improved Dorcas Thimble**  
**Sterling Silver - Steel lined**  
**will be exchanged FREE OF**  
**CHARGE if rendered useless**  
**from ANY CAUSE.**  
**None Genuine unless stamped**  
**DORCAS together with**  
**INITIALS C.H.**  
**& SIZE NUMBER CH. 10**  
**on the rim as shown. DORCAS**



**The Dorcas**

dark blue box  
 with white trim  
 gold lettering  
 green paper guarantee with gold lettering  
 white velvet lining



**The Dorcas**

cracked grey-green box  
 gold lettering  
 green paper guarantee  
 white-pink velvet lining



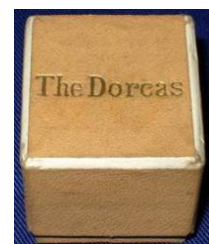
**THE IMPROVED DORCAS**

cross-hatched blue box  
 with white trim  
 gold lettering  
 maroon paper guarantee  
 green velvet lining



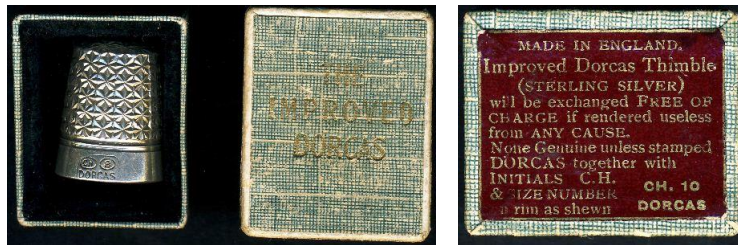
**THE IMPROVED DORCAS**

cross-hatched grey box  
 with white trim  
 gold lettering at lower edge  
 white velvet lining



**The Dorcas**

yellow box  
 with white trim  
 gold lettering  
 brown paper guarantee  
 white velvet lining  
 size 30x27mm



### THE IMPROVED DORCAS

cross-hatched blue box  
with white trim  
gold lettering  
maroon paper guarantee  
green velvet lining  
33x27x29mm

NOTE the **anomaly** in the wording!!

There is no mention of steel-lined that is on other Dorcas boxes!!  
(Sterling Silver) only



### THE IMPROVED DORCAS

mottled yellow-green  
gold lettering

## GOLD DORCAS



### 9-carat gold steel-lined Dorcas box

#### The Dorcas

pinky-grey box  
with white trim  
gold lettering  
green velvet lining  
the box is hinged and has no guarantee label  
9ct GOLD is lettered on inside lid  
size 32x26.5mm

# THE LITTLE DORCAS



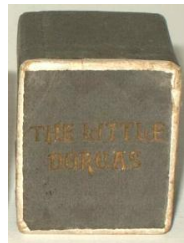
**The Little Dorcas label**

**MADE IN ENGLAND**  
**"The Little Dorcas"**  
**Sterling Silver - steel lined.**  
**None genuine unless stamped**  
**LITTLE DORCAS**



## **THE LITTLE DORCAS**

grey blue box  
 with white trim  
 gold lettering  
 maroon paper label  
 pale blue velvet lining



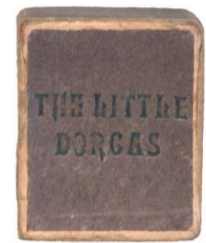
## **THE LITTLE DORCAS**

grey box  
 with white trim  
 gold lettering  
 maroon paper  
 description  
 with Guarantee 2 for  
 standard Dorcas  
 thimbles  
 grey velvet lining



## **THE LITTLE DORCAS**

purplish-grey box  
 with white trim  
 gold lettering  
 maroon paper  
 description with Little  
 Dorcas label  
 grey velvet lining



## **THE LITTLE DORCAS**

purplish-grey box  
 with white trim  
 shows as green lettering  
 as gold has worn off  
 maroon paper label  
 grey velvet lining  
 size 30x25x24mm  
 photo Irene Schwall



# THE LONDON DORCAS



## **The London Dorcas**

olive drab green box  
with white edging  
deep grey lettering slightly diagonally  
dark blue velvet lining  
there is additional lettering that looks like  
S F & Co  
size 34x26x25mm  
there is no exchange guarantee label



the very rare thimble for these boxes

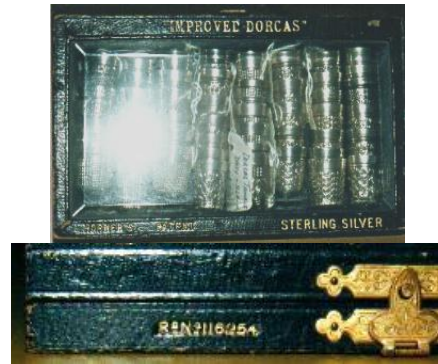
photo Irene Schwall

# COMPOSITE DORCAS BOXES



**glass-topped Dorcas display box**  
**"DORCAS" THIMBLE**  
**STERLING SILVER**  
**HORNER'S. PATENT**

with RD No.116254 on the box under Horner name



**glass-topped Dorcas display box**  
**"IMPROVED DORCAS"**  
**HORNER'S. PATENT**  
**STERLING SILVER**

with RD No.116254 on the box's front edge



**black Bakelite Dorcas display stand**  
 Odeonesque shape  
 with sized spaces for 12 thimbles  
 115mm in height



**glass-topped cardboard Dorcas display box**  
 for "Improved Dorcas" displays  
 on the base are sizes with inside measurements  
 12 smaller boxes with no covers - all have the red Guarantee 2 label  
 with green velvet lining  
 size 3x7 inches



cardboard **The Dorcas Thimble box**  
size 165X65x25mm

also shows Charles Horner's trademark on the bottom R-H corner  
photo Irene Schwall



**Counter display case with Dorcas thimbles**  
**DORCAS**  
**GUARANTEED TO LAST A LIFETIME**



- 1: framed holder is free-standing with a glass cover showing twelve Dorcas thimbles
- 2: the same holder with the guarantee label and price displayed
- 3: the glass lid open
- 4: the inner box of Dorcas thimbles, which is lined with royal blue plush





L: these are the mint thimbles removed from the display case – note that the price of **2/6** for each thimble is displayed on the guarantee label

C: the thimbles have been rendered useless for sewing by having a hole machine-punched thru the thimbles

R: the Dorcas name has been obliterated

lower: showing the detail of the Dorcas name and size obliteration

Pelham Burn - on page 14 - features four examples of these hole punched Dorcas thimbles but could not offer an explanation – seeing the whole display holder now makes sense of the holes!

This interesting set was offered for sale on eBay in 2021  
(with the explanation for the punched holes being “professionally drilled for a chatelaine”)



## DORCAS BOXES WITH ANOMALIES



has this box been doctored?

probably not, having heard from the eBay seller  
the Guarantee 1 label used on the base of Dorcas boxes  
has been applied to the inner lid of a thimble box

with no signs of glue, discoloration etc

the colour of the inner box is the type used for other Dorcas thimbles

and it would appear that the mint Dorcas thimble fits very well

the Jeweller's details are lettered on the outside of the box

it is likely that the boxes were originally produced in this manner

jeweller: Smith Brothers 2 Market Street Rotherham

Have you encountered other jeweller's Dorcas boxes?



## HORNER'S BOXES FOR HIS STERLING SILVER THIMBLES



**Hall Marked Silver**

note the similar-coloured boxes  
to his Dorcas boxes



**Hall Marked Silver  
Made in England**



**Hall Marked Silver  
Made in England**



**Charles Horner,  
Jeweller,  
23, Northgate.  
Halifax.**

note: the thimble at L was not made by Horner

# Other boxes

## THE DORIS



**The  
"Doris" Thimble  
STERLING SILVER  
With intermediate steel  
Lining, very strong, and  
well finished.  
MADE IN ENGLAND**



**The Doris**  
grey blue box  
with white trim  
cursive gold lettering diagonally  
maroon paper label  
green velvet lining



**The Doris**  
grey blue box  
with white trim  
cursive black lettering diagonally  
cream paper label  
green velvet lining



**The Doris**  
green box  
with white trim  
cursive gold lettering diagonally  
cream paper label  
green velvet lining

# THE DOROTHY



**The Dorothy thimble box**

cream or grey boxes with no guarantee of exchange

## **THE DOROTHY THIMBLE**

***HEAVILY SILVER CASED***

***HAND CHASED***

***No. 240/8***

***MADE IN ENGLAND.***

## DREEMA



The Dreema label

The  
**'Dreema Thimble.'**  
**STERLING SILVER**  
This thimble has a  
steel lining between  
two layers of solid  
sterling silver.  
The beauty of silver  
with strength of steel.



### **DREEMA THIMBLES**

cross-hatched grey box  
with two gold stars  
gold lettering  
grey paper with  
green lettering  
blue velvet lining



### **DREEMA THIMBLES**

grey-green box  
with two gold stars  
gold lettering  
grey paper with  
green lettering  
red velvet lining



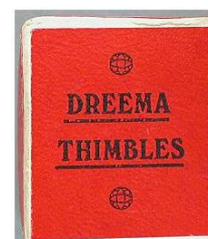
### **DREEMA THIMBLES**

grey mottled box  
with white trim  
with four blue  
diamond shapes  
blue lettering  
grey paper with  
blue lettering  
red or blue velvet  
lining



### **DREEMA THIMBLES**

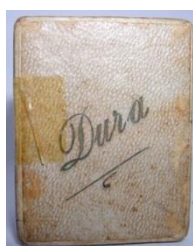
grey dimpled box  
with white trim  
with two gold  
curlicues  
gold lettering  
grey paper with  
green lettering  
blue velvet lining



### **DREEMA THIMBLES**

orange-red box  
with white trim  
with two gold stars  
black lettering  
white velvet lining

## DURA



### **DURA**

finely dotted grey box  
with white edging  
cursive deep grey lettering diagonally  
no guarantee  
black velvet lining  
size 32.5x25mm



### **DURA**

finely dotted mauve box  
with white edging  
cursive gold lettering diagonally  
no guarantee  
white velvet lining

## James Walker Ltd



grey box  
guarantee



grey box  
guarantee

**This Thimble is Real Silver throughout, specially strengthened in process of Manufacture, and should last a life-time. Same will be exchanged Free of Charge at any time if damaged.**



green & white box  
no guarantee

THIS BOX HOUSES AN ORIGINAL STEEL-CLAD THIMBLE



## References

Edwin Holmes *History of thimbles*. 1985  
Tom Lawson *Charles Horner of Halifax*. 2002  
Diane Pelham Burn *Identifying steel-cored thimbles*. 1993  
Estelle Zalkin *Zalkin's handbook of thimbles & sewing implements*. 1988

## Contributors

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This listing of Dorcas thimble boxes does not purport to be complete or accurate in all aspects.  
Rather it invites comment and contribution to add to our knowledge. My thanks to the contributors.

EMAIL [thimbleselect@bigpond.com](mailto:thimbleselect@bigpond.com) TO SHARE YOUR KNOWLEDGE.

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